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and Nevada to Southern California:
Route of Jedediah S. Smith
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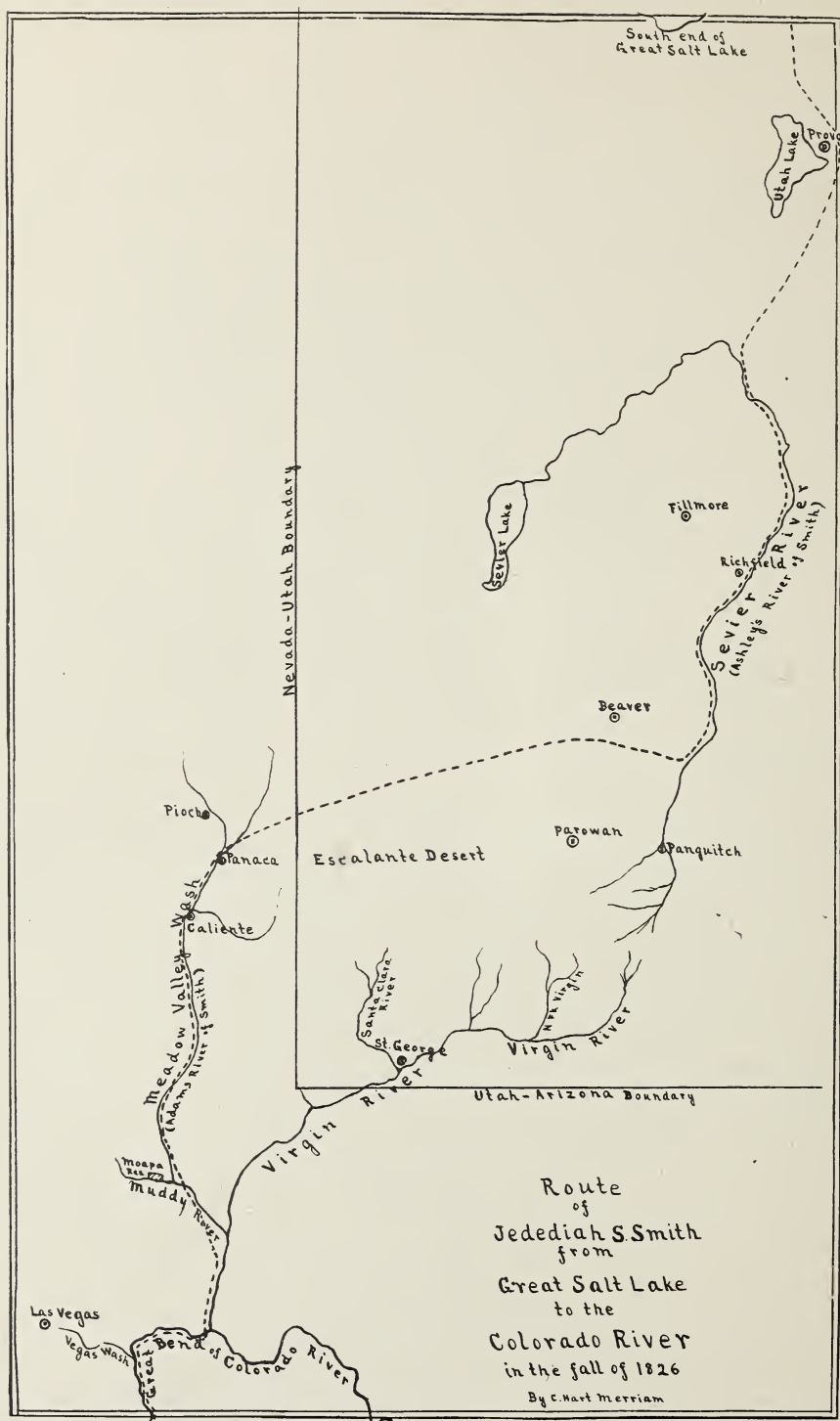
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BY

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EARLIEST CROSSING OF THE DESERTS OF UTAH AND NEVADA TO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: ROUTE OF JEDEDIAH S. SMITH IN 1826

In the early fall of 1826 the venturesome explorer and fur-trader, Jedediah S. Smith, led a small party on horseback from Great Salt Lake, Utah, to San Diego, California. He appears to have been the first white man to cross the vast expanse of unknown deserts between the Rocky Mountain region and southern California, as he was also the first to cross the Sierra Nevada, which he did in May of the following year.¹

There is some doubt as to certain details of the route, but in his letter to General William Clark, of Lewis and Clark fame, written July 12, 1827,² he states: "My general course on leaving the Salt Lake was South-W. & West"—and adds that after passing Little Utah Lake he ascended "Ashley's river" [now known as the Sevier] which he erroneously supposed to empty into Utah Lake. On this river he found "a Nation of Indians who call themselves Sampatch," who he says "were friendly disposed towards us." These were a Utah tribe inhabiting Sevier and San Pete valleys and now commonly called Sanpeet Indians.

After ascending the Sevier (how far he does not state), he continues: "I passed over a range of Mountains running S. E. and N. W. and struck a river running S. W. which I called *Adams River*, in compliment to our President. The water is of a muddy cast, & is a little

¹ See my article entitled "*First Crossing of the Sierra Nevada.*" *Sierra Club Bull.*, vol. xi, No. 4, pp. 375-379, June, 1923.

² Smith's letter to General William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, from which the quotations in the present article are taken, is preserved in the archives of the Office of Indian Affairs at Washington. It is written in a remarkably clear hand and is dated "Little Lake of Bear River, July 12th, 1827."

Dale in his book entitled "*The Ashley-Smith Explorations*" (pp. 186-194, 1918) published what is believed to be a copy of the same letter, as contained in the letter book of General William Clark, still preserved in the archives of the Kansas State Historical Society at Topeka. As printed by Dale the letter is dated July 17, 1827, but I am informed by Miss Clara Francis, Librarian of the Kansas Historical Society, that this is an error. Miss Francis writes: "I note that you mention the discrepancies in date. I suppose that has come through transcribing or poor proof reading, for this letter, under my hand at this moment, is dated July 12th, and the 2 is utterly unlike the 7 in the year 1827. So there could be no possibility of its being July 17." Miss Francis adds the important information that the letter "in the letter book of General William Clark is not an original letter from Jedediah Smith," and goes on to say: "We have some original letters and the writing is utterly unlike."

In this connection I wish to record my obligation to Miss Francis and also to Miss Stella M. Drumm, Librarian of the Missouri Historical Society at St. Louis, both of whom have contributed valuable information bearing on this subject.

brackish—the country is mountainous to East—toward the West there are Sandy plains and detached Rocky Hills. Passing down this river some distance, I fell in with a Nation of Indians who call themselves Pa Ulches.³ these Indians, as well as those last mentioned, wear rabbit skin robes—who raise some little corn & Pumpkins.”

Recent commentators, Chittenden in his *American Fur Trade of the Far West* (Vol. I, p. 283, 1902), Wagner in *Adventures of Zenas Leonard* (footnote p. 153, 1904), Richman, “Map of 22 Spanish and American Trails and Routes” in his book entitled “*California under Spain and Mexico*” (1911), and Dale in *The Ashley-Smith Explorations* (p. 188 footnote, 1918), have identified *Adams River* as the Virgin, but I believe this to be an error and am certain that the stream in question is the one now known as Meadow Valley Wash and its continuation the Muddy. Following are my reasons:

Smith well knew that in order to reach Southern California from Salt Lake his general course must be to the southwest.

In ascending the upper Sevier he had already gone a long distance south and knew that the time had arrived for turning to the west. Furthermore the forbidding aspect of the escarpments and mountains on the east and south would naturally have led him to seek a passage to the westward. That he did this is proved by his own words, for he tells us that his general course was southwest and west, and adds: “I passed over a range of Mountains running S.E. & N.W. and struck a river running S.W. which I called *Adams River*, in compliment to our President.” That this could not have been the Virgin is evident from the circumstance that the Virgin does not lie in that direction, its headwaters being immediately south of and close to those of the Sevier—both rising in canyons of the Markagunt Plateau, near its eastern front. What stream then could he have reached?

After crossing the mountains west of the upper Sevier, probably the Beaver Range, his course to the southwest and west lay over the open Escalante Desert. No stranger traversing this desert would attempt to force a passage through the mountains to the south, and moreover no waters from the desert flow southward, all the northern tributaries of the Virgin in this region being short streams flowing south from the *southern* slope of the divide. Hence the only river he could possibly have reached is Meadow Valley Wash—for there is no

³ Smith's writing of the word *Pa Ulches* is of course intended for *Pa Utches*, though the *t* is not crossed. However, it is written with a single upright stroke, as are all his *t*'s, while throughout the manuscript his *l*'s are looped. In Smith's letter to Clark as published in French in *Les Nouvelles Annales des Voyages* (2 ser. vol. 7, pp. 208-212, 1833) the correct form, *Pa Utches*, is given.

other. Once on the Escalante Desert the lay of the land leads naturally to the southwest and west as far as the low cedar hills of the Utah-Nevada boundary, beyond which lies the long north and south valley known as Meadow Valley Wash—which he probably reached in the neighborhood of Panaca or Pioche. Thirty-two years ago I followed this same course myself on horseback, and it has since been adopted by the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad—it being the natural passage to the southwest.

Sometime after crossing the mountains west of the Sevier, Smith described the country as “mountainous to the East; towards the West there are sandy plains and detached rocky hills.” This is correct for the Escalante Desert and Meadow Valley Wash, but grossly incorrect for any part of the Virgin.

In order to have reached the upper waters of the then unknown Virgin River, Smith would have been obliged to depart from the direction he wished to take and continue south up the Sevier to its very head, thus entering the region of the formidable cliffs and canyons of the Markagunt Plateau, instead of crossing, as he said he did, “a range of mountains running S.E. and N.W.”—the mountains that separate the upper course of the Sevier from the valleys on the west that lead to the Escalante Desert. Furthermore, the part of the Virgin which he could have reached and followed on horseback is so short that he could not possibly have marched down it for 12 days—or even half that number—unless entangled in its marvelous canyons which, had he seen, he most certainly would have mentioned. And finally, the main course of the Virgin to its junction with the Muddy being *westerly* and *southwesterly*, he could not have described it as *turning to the southeast* two days’ march from its junction with the Colorado.

Remember his statement that about 10 days’ march down the stream “the river turns to the southeast.” This just fits the Muddy, but is entirely wrong for the Virgin, as admitted by Dale, who, misidentifying the stream as the Virgin, criticized Smith’s directions as “confused and inadequate.” Smith continued following the river “two days further to where it empties into the Seedekeeden,” by which name, ordinarily written Seedskedee, the Colorado River and its upper continuation the Green were then known.

Referring again to the stream he named Adams River he says: “Passing down this river some distance, I fell in with a Nation who call themselves *Pa-Ulches*”; and adds, “here (about ten days march down it) the river turns to the South East.” This is very important information as it locates his position with remarkable exactness, for

we know that the "*Pa-Ulches*" or "*Pa-Utches*"—written *Payuchas* and *Payuchis* by the early Spanish explorers, Escalante, Garces, Font, and Cortez—dwelt and still dwell on the lower part of Meadow Valley Wash and the adjacent part of the Muddy, and we know also that this is where the stream turns to the southeast.⁴

That just at this point Smith chose the gravel mesa several miles west of the stream bed instead of the less desirable course closer in, is obvious to anyone following the route on horseback, and is absolutely proved by the following interesting circumstance:

In his letter to General Clark, Smith makes particular mention of a remarkable Salt Cave. After having followed for some time the stream he named Adams River and which I identify as Meadow Valley Wash, and after passing the *Pa Ulche* [Pah Ute] Indians, he states, "Here (about 10 days march down it) the river turns to the South East." This would have brought him to the neighborhood of the junction of the Muddy and Virgin. He then goes on to say, "On the S.W. side of the river there is a *Cave* the entrance of which is about 10 or 15 feet high & 5 or 6 feet in width—after descending about 15 feet, the room opens out from 25 to 30 feet in length & 15 to 20 feet in width. The roof, sides, & floor are solid Rocksalt." I was told of this Salt Cave when I visited the region on horseback 32 years ago. It is well known locally and is situated about 5 miles southwest of the little place called St. Thomas in Clark County, southeastern Nevada. In other words, it is on the gravel mesa a few miles west and a little south of the junction of the Muddy and Virgin, thus explaining why the union of the two streams was not observed by Smith.

It is singular how proofs multiply, and also how easily they are overlooked. Among the precious archives of the Missouri Historical Society is the journal of Harrison G. Rogers, a member of Smith's Expedition. It was rescued by Smith from the Indians who had killed Rogers in 1828, and was published by Dale in his account of the Ashley-Smith explorations. As would be expected, it contains entries of more than passing importance, fixing dates and localities. Thus under date of October 1 and 2 Rogers locates the party on "Muddy River," and on October 5 and 24 and November 5, on the "Siskadee"—the name then used by hunters and trappers for the Colorado. This not only confirms Smith's route but also indicates that notwithstanding his bestowal of the name Adams River on Meadow Valley Wash and

⁴Nearly half a century after Smith's passage, Major Powell visited the same Indians, and in writing of them in connection with the present loose use of the term *Pahute*, states: "but the Indians know only those on the Muddy by that name." (Rept. Commr. Ind. Affairs for 1873, p. 45, 1874.)

the Muddy, others of the party actually called it *Muddy River*. So far as I am aware this is the first mention of the name.

The most important evidence after Smith's own account is to be found in the maps of General Gallatin (1836) and Commander Wilkes (1841), in both of which the geographic results of Smith's explorations were incorporated.⁵ Both show Adams River in approximately the right position for the Muddy (so far as permitted by the distorted course of the Colorado) while the stream now called the Virgin is neither named nor shown, except the few miles below the junction of the Muddy, which, being apparently a direct continuation of the Muddy, Smith naturally mistook for it—he having never seen any part of the Virgin above the junction, as already explained. On both maps Adams River is shown as a long stream and its course is correctly given as southwest by south for a long distance and then southeast to the Colorado River—thus agreeing with Smith's account and also with the combined courses of Meadow Valley Wash, the Muddy, and the lower part of the Virgin, below the junction. It is surprising that in a hurried horseback journey over mountains and deserts the course of a previously unknown stream should be described with such accuracy.

Frémont, in the large scale map showing his return route from Southern California to Utah in the spring of 1843, gives the course and name of the Virgin and its important branch the Santa Clara, with approximate correctness, and shows also the course of the Muddy, which though not named on the map, was called *Rio de los Angeles* in the text. Had the information recorded by Gallatin, Wilkes, and Frémont been perpetuated, many of the errors of subsequent cartographers would have been avoided.

Among the maps showing varying degrees of confusion in the positions and names of the Virgin, Meadow Valley Wash and the Muddy may be mentioned: *Mitchell's* New Map of Texas, Oregon and California, 1846; *Colton's* Map of New Mexico and Utah, 1855; *Lieut. Whipple's* Government Map, 1854; *Lieut. Warren's* Map of the Territory of the United States from the Mississippi to the Pacific Ocean, 1857; *Major Emory's* Map of the United States and Territories between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean, 1857-1858; *Ives'* graphic relief map (drawn by Egloffstein) entitled "Map No. 2, Rio Colorado

⁵ The maps referred to are, Gallatin's *Map of Indian Tribes*, 1836; and Wilkes' *Map of Upper California*, 1841. But on the 1848 edition of Gallatin's map, the name Rio Virgin is substituted for Adams River, the river is greatly extended to the north, and given a course which is a compromise between that of the Sevier and Meadow Valley Wash with its continuation—the Muddy and Lower Virgin. This may be the source of the misidentification of Adams River by later authors.

of the West," 1858; the *Abbé Domenech's* Map of the United States, 1860; *Lloyd's* Map of the Territories and Pacific States, 1865; the Government *Land Office* maps of "Utah and Nevada, 1866"; *Keeler's* large "National Map of the Territories of the United States from the Mississippi River to the Ocean, 1867"; and *Bancroft's* Map of California and Nevada, 1868.

The Wheeler Survey map sheets published in 1874 (Nos. 50, 58, 59, 66, and 67) show with much detail the region between Great Salt Lake and the Great Bend of the Colorado, including Escalante Desert and the courses of Sevier River, Meadow Valley Wash, the Muddy, Santa Clara, and Virgin, thus covering the whole of the country traversed by Jedediah Smith from Utah Lake to the Colorado. They are very graphic, exhibiting in bold relief the mountains, canyons, and plateau escarpments of the region, and while not always accurate in minor details should be consulted by everyone interested in tracing the steps of the first white man who had the courage to explore this unknown route to California.

In conclusion, it may be said with confidence that "Ashley's river" of Smith is the upper part of the Sevier—the part flowing *northerly* toward Utah Lake, as correctly identified by Chittenden, Richman, and Dale; that "Adams River" of Smith is *Meadow Valley Wash* of eastern Nevada and its continuation the Muddy—not the Virgin, as heretofore misidentified (except the last few miles of its lower course, as previously explained); and that *Smith's route after crossing the mountains west of the Sevier lay across the Escalante Desert and thence down Meadow Valley Wash and the Muddy to the lower Virgin*, and down it to the Colorado River, which he crossed to the south side and followed westerly and southerly around the Great Bend, continuing south to the Mohave villages, where he recrossed to the west side before setting out over the Mohave Desert bound for the coast region of Southern California.

JEDEDIAH SMITH'S LETTER TO GENERAL CLARK

[Verbatim copy from original in Office of Indian Affairs, Washington.]

Little Lake of Bear River.

July 12th. 1827.

Gen^l. Wm. Clark

Sup^t. Indian Affairs

Sir.

My situation here, has enabled me to collect information respecting a Section of the country which, to the citizens of the U. States, has

hitherto been veiled in obscurity;—I allude to the country S.W. of the *Great Salt Lake*, west of the Rocky Mountains.

I started about the 22nd. of Aug^t. 1826 from the Great Salt Lake with a party of fifteen men for the purpose of exploring the Country S.W. which was entirely unknown to me, and of which I could collect no satisfactory information from the Indians who inhabit this country on its N.E. borders.

My general course on leaving the Salt Lake, was South-W. & West—passing the Little Uta Lake, and ascending Ashleys River which empties into the *little Uta Lake*: from this, I found no more sign of Buffalo—there are a few Antelope & Mountain Sheep and an abundance of *Black-tailed Hares*. On Ashleys river, I found a Nation of Indians who call themselves *Sampatch*.—they were friendly disposed towards us. I passed over a range of Mountains running S.E. & N.W. and struck a river running S.W. which I called *Adams' River*, in Compliment to our *President*. The water is of a muddy cast, & is a little brackish—the country is mountainous to the East—towards the West, there are Sandy Plains, and detached Rocky Hills. Passing down this river some distance, I fell in with a Nation of Indians, who call themselves *Pa Ulches*. these Indians, as well as those last mentioned, wear rabbit Skin robes.—who raise some little Corn. & Pumpkins. the Country is nearly destitute of Game of any description except a few Hares here (about 10 days march down it) the river turns to the South east. On the S.W. side of the river there is a *Cave* the entrance of which is about 10 or 15 feet high & 5 or 6 feet in width—after descending about 15 feet, the room opens out from 25 to 30 feet in length & 15 to 20 feet in width. The roof, sides, & floor are Solid Rock Salt—a sample of which, I send you, with some other articles which will be hereafter described. I have found a kind of plant of the Prickly Pear kind, which I called the Cabbage Pear.—the largest of which grow about 2½ feet high & 1½ feet in diameter. Upon examination, I found it to be nearly of the substance of a Turnip, altho' by no means palatable.—its form was similar to that of an Egg—being smaller at the ground & top, than in the middle.—it is covered with Pricks, similar to the Prickly Pear, with which you are acquainted.

There are here also, a number of shrubs & small trees with which I was not acquainted previous to my route there, and which I cannot at present describe satisfactorily, as it would take more space, than I can here allot.

The *Pa Ulches* have a number of marble pipes, one of which I obtained & Send you—altho' it has been broken since I have had it in

my possession—they told me there was a quantity of the same material in their country.—I also obtained of them, a Knife of *Flint* which I send you, but it has likewise been broken by accident.

I followed Adams' River 2 days further, to where it empties, into the Seeds Keeden, a southeast course.—I crossed the Seeds Keeden and went down it four days, a South Course. I here found the country remarkably barren, rocky & mountainous—there are a good many rapids in the river. About at this place a Valley opens out, about 5 to 15 miles in width, which on the river banks is Timbered and fertile. I here found a Nation of Indians who call themselves Am-muchábas.—the cultivate the Soil, and raise Corn, Beans, Pumpkins, Water & Muskmellons in abundance, and also a little Wheat & Cotton. I was now nearly destitute of horses, and had learned what it was to do without food. I therefore remained there fifteen days and recruited my men, and I was enabled also to exchange my horses & purchase a few more of a few runaway Indians who stole some horses of the Spaniards—I have got information of the Spanish country, (The Californias) and obtained two guides, recrossed the *Seeds Keeden* which I afterwards found emptied into the gulph of California, about 80 miles from this place by the name of the *Collerado* [words erased] the river *Gila* from the east.—I travelled a West course, fifteen days over a Country of complete Barrens.—generally travelling from morning untill night without water. I crossed a Salt Plane, about 20 miles long & 8 wide [now known as *Soda Lake or the Sink of the Mohave*], on the surface was a crust of beautiful fine white Salt, quite thin.—under the surface there is a Layer of salt from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in depth, between this & the upper layer, there is about 4 inches of Yellowish sand.

On my arrival in the Province of upper California, I was looked upon with surprise, & was compelled to appear in presence of the Governor of the Californias, residing at Sⁿ. Diego,—where by the assistance of some American gentlemen, (especially Capt. B. H. Cunningham of the *Ship Courier*, from *Boston*, I was enable to obtain permission to return with my men, the route I came, and purchase such supplies as I stood in need of.—The Governor would not allow me to travel up the Sea coast to *Bodago*. I returned to my party and purchased such articles as were necessary, & went eastward of the Spanish settlements, on the route I had come in. I then steered my course N.W.—keeping from 150 to 200 miles from the Sea coast—a very high range of mountains being on the east. After travelling 300 miles in that direction, through a country somewhat fertile, in which there was a great many Indians mostly naked, and destitute of arms, with the

exception of *Bows & Arrows*, and what is very singular among indians the cut their hair to the length of 3 inches—they proved to be friendly.—their manner of living is on fish, roots, acors & grass.

On my arrival at a River [Kings River] which I called the *Wimmel-che*, (named after a Tribe of Indians who reside on it of that name) I found a few Beaver.—& Elk, Deer & antelope in abundance. I here made a small hunt, and attempted to take my party across the [mountain] which I before mentioned, & which I called *Mount Joseph*, to come on & join my Partners at the Great Salt Lake.—I found the Snow so deep on Mount Joseph, that I could not cross my horses,—five of which starved to death. I was compelled therefore to return to the Valley which I had left. And there leaving my party, I started with two men, seven horses & 2 mules, which I loaded with hay for the horses & provisions for ourselves, and Started on the 20th of May & succeeded in crossing it in 8 days—having lost only two horses & 1 mule. I found the snow on the top of this mountain from 4 to 8 feet deep but it was so consolidated by the heat of the sun, that my horses only sunk from $\frac{1}{2}$ foot to one foot deep.

After travelling 20 days from the East side of *Mount Joseph*, I struck the S.W. corner of the Great Salt Lake, travelling over a country completely barren, and destitute of Game. We frequently travelled without water sometimes for two days, over sandy deserts, where there was no sign of vegetation. Where we found water in some of the Rocky hills, we most generally found some Indians, who appeared the most miserable of the human race,—having nothing to subsist on (nor any clothing) except grass seed, Grass-hoppers &c.

When we arrived at the Salt Lake, we had but one horse & one mule remaining, which were so poor, that they could scarce carry the little camp-equipage which I had along.—the balance of my horses, I was compelled to eat as the gave out. The Comp^y are now starting; therefore must close this Communication.

Yours respectfully

JEDEDIAH SMITH, of the
firm of Smith, Jackson & Sublette.

[The spelling, capitalization and punctuation of the original have been faithfully followed. But it should be explained that at the end of the sentences and clauses there occurs a short stroke resembling an abbreviated dash, which is here rendered by a dash.]

C. HART MERRIAM.

